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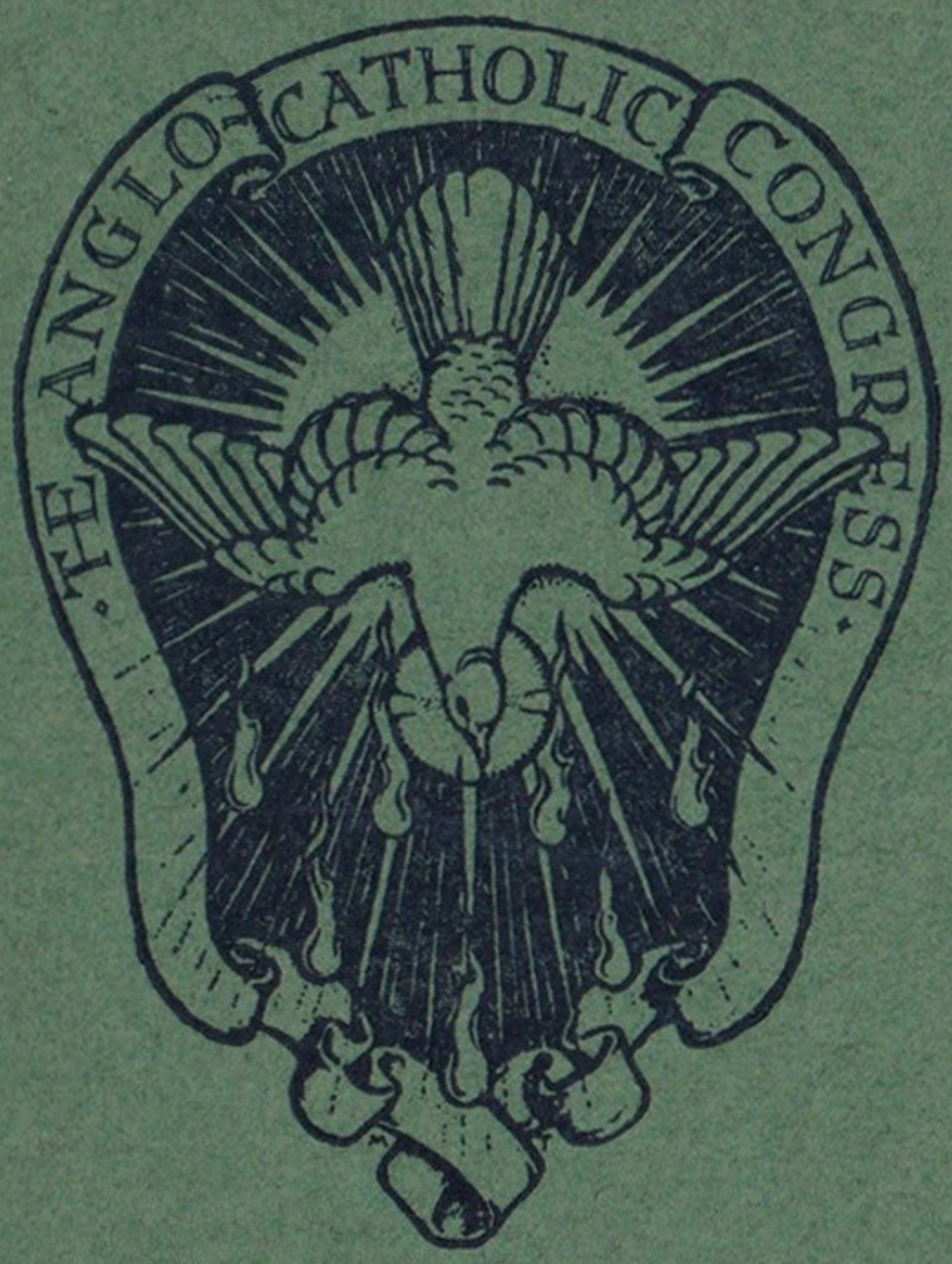
THE CONGRESS BOOKS: No. 7

THE ASCENSION



By F. W. GREEN

Fellow of Merton College,
Oxford, Examining Chaplain
to the Bishop of Manchester

THE CONGRESS BOOKS

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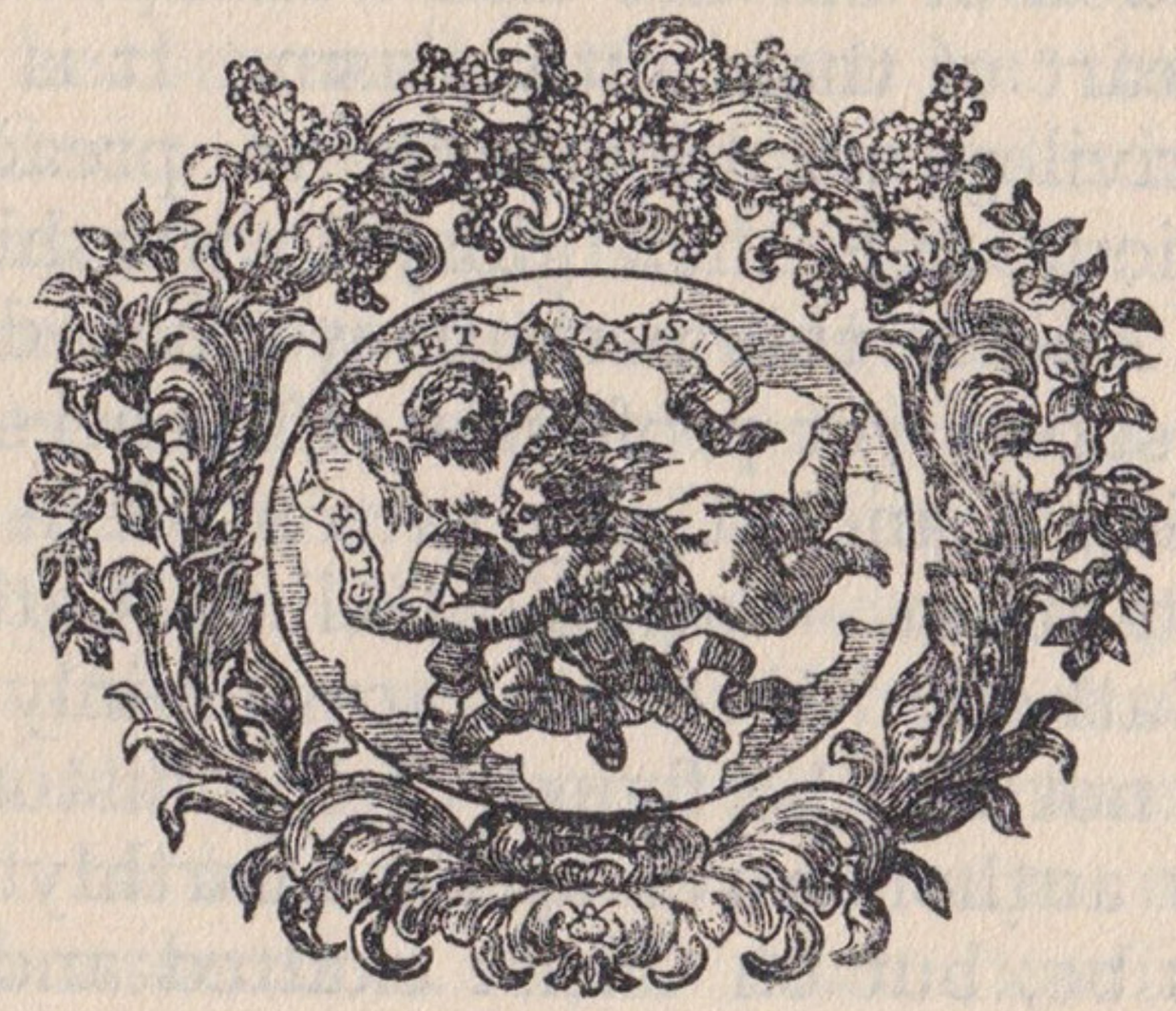

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The Ascension

BELIEF in the Ascension of our Lord into heaven is for Christians not only important but vital. If the Incarnation is the foundation of our faith, and the Resurrection the ground of our hope, the Ascension is the inspiration of our life and worship, indeed the very heart of their enthusiasm. It is the duty and privilege of Christians to preach Christ as Saviour, it is their glory to worship him as King. And in this perhaps we may detect one of the subtle yet profound differences between Catholicism and at any rate modern forms of Protestantism. Catholic feeling, Catholic art, and Catholic devotion are mainly concentrated not on the figure of the historic Jesus, utterly authoritative as that earthly life must always be, but on Christ exalted and reigning —reigning even from the cross. Touching and beautiful the picture of the '*Ecce Homo*' may be: but a stronger and a more triumphant faith has been the secret of Catholic courage and devotion, ever since the first martyr saw the heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, or

the seer of the *Revelation* saw in the living flame the glorified Humanity. The Ascension is more than merely a past event : it stands for an ever-present fact.

An event nevertheless it was ; and it is just here that there are difficulties which must be honestly faced if we are to be always ready to give an answer for the hope that is in us.

Although the Bible several times mentions the last appearance of our Lord on earth, there is, strictly speaking, only one full account of his Ascension. It is true that St. Mark's gospel records the fact that he was received up into heaven and sat down on the right hand of God : but this is hardly a description, the language is obviously figurative. And in any case the present ending of St. Mark's gospel, as indeed is well known, is an appendix substituted for the original ending, which was very early lost. The gospel according to St. Matthew gives an account of the last appearance in Galilee and the great commission of our Lord to his disciples, but says nothing about an ascension. (*St. Matt.* xxviii. 16.) St. John similarly describes an appearance by the shore of the Lake of Galilee, but he too says nothing of an ascension, except (characteristically) in two apparently casual references in other parts of his gospel (*St. John* vi. 62 ; xx. 17). Only St. Luke describes the leave-taking on the Mount of Olives. 'He

led them out as far as to Bethany and he lifted up his hands and blessed them' (*St. Luke* xxiv. 50). But even then he does not describe anything that could be called an ascension. 'And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them.' The words 'and was carried up into heaven' are omitted in some of the most important manuscripts, and may, therefore, not be genuine.

It is only when we turn to St. Luke's second volume, the *Acts of the Apostles*, that we get anything like a description of an ascension. 'And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold two men stood by them in white apparel, which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come, in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven' (*Acts* i. 9). What seems to be meant is that the disciples, as they stood round, did actually behold our Lord's body lifted from the earth a certain distance, after which a cloud hid him. As the cloud floated or dissolved their eyes followed it, as though they were beholding the disappearance of Jesus into the region of the stars.

Now we know enough of the facts of nature and the physical structure of the universe to

understand that Christ did not ascend to the region of the stars. Heaven is not a place situated above us in respect of geographical position; nor would anything be gained by his going from one planet to another. It is, however, quite reasonable to suppose that the physical elevation of our Lord's body off the earth, and its reception by the cloud, was a piece of symbolism; a sacrament or outward and visible sign of the inward truth that he had passed beyond the veil of all earthly sight, and had taken his glory. For the clouds, in the Bible, are regarded as the natural medium of communication between earth and heaven, as well as symbols of the veil which must needs be drawn between the frail perceptions of weak and sinful men, and the refulgent majesty of the glory of God. The event may in fact have happened in something like the way that Raphael, in his great picture, imagined Jesus to have appeared to the three disciples in the vision of the Transfiguration. In any case we may note the contrast evidently intended in this wonderful story with the record of the previous appearances of our Lord after his resurrection. The vanishing on this last occasion was different, inasmuch as it was gradual, deliberate, and final, 'as they were looking.' The process could be observed up to a certain point, then no more.

6 Its Scriptural Interpretation

SO ran the historical tradition ; but this alone did not suffice to express the full belief of Christians. St. Paul saw Christ always in one blaze of glory. In the first ardour of his conversion, which never wholly faded from his mind, he could not distinguish between the glory of the Resurrection and the glory of the Ascension : they were one and the same thing to him. And it is probable that where St. Paul mentions the Resurrection he means to imply the Ascension with it, just as the references in the New Testament to Baptism imply Confirmation as another stage in one process.

But, as usual with St. Paul, we must look for his profoundest teaching on Christian doctrine in places where the lesson he wishes to impress is most practical. In the epistle to the Philippians he teaches humility by reference to our Lord's exaltation, which was the natural result of the experience of humiliation through which he had voluntarily passed. 'Wherefore God hath highly exalted him, and given him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow' (*Philipp*. ii. 10). Similarly in the epistle to the Ephesians, to teach the lesson of unity among believers possessing spiritual endowments strangely varied and unequal, he explains the reason for that inequality by ascribing the gifts to the prodigal generosity

of a triumphant conqueror. Using the words of the psalmist, he describes a triumphal procession winding up the newly conquered Hill of Zion. The figure is that of a victorious captain taking possession of the enemy's citadel, with his train of captives and spoil following him in triumph: the individual warrior is for the moment swallowed up in the glory of the occasion, and there is no room for the advancement of particular claims. 'When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men' (*Ephes.* iv. 8 ff.). Henceforth he showers upon his Church the gifts of the Holy Spirit in all their profuse abundance.

In neither of these passages, of course, is St. Paul giving a precise statement of Christian doctrine; they are important as allusions to a belief in the Ascension of Christ as being at once the inspiration to a life of Christian humility and patient toil, as well as the source and explanation of the power, grace, and authority inherent in the Church, which is the body of Christ. We too, in virtue of our incorporation in that body by Baptism, have been made 'to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (*Ephes.* ii. 6).

The epistle to the Hebrews, which, though not written by St. Paul, yet has much of his spirit, has the same identification of the Resurrection and the Ascension as together making one great event with no logical interval

between them. 'Who when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high' (*Hebr.* i. 3). Christ's absolute exaltation to the highest position in the universe, whether in the suffering of his passion, or by his resurrection and ascension, is throughout this epistle made the supreme reason for claiming and holding the allegiance of men, who felt strongly the counter-attraction of a conservative appeal for loyalty to Judaism and the old faith. It is, moreover, the epistle to the Hebrews which tells us that as our High Priest who has passed into the heavens, Jesus Christ ever liveth to make intercession for us. (*Hebr.* vii. 25.)

We have not space here to speak of the imagery of the book of *Revelation*. We may note, however, the place of the Ascension in what appears to be a very ancient form of creed or hymn, quoted in the first epistle to Timothy: '[God] was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit; seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles; believed on in the world, received up into glory' (1 *Tim.* iii. 16). The New Testament writers taken as a whole may be said to regard the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ as steps in the process of his exaltation through suffering, 'as the absolute sacrifice of self which issued in the absolute triumph over the limitations of earthly existence' (Westcott).

NOW it is quite clear that in all such passages from the *Acts* and the epistles the writers are largely using the language of symbolism. They make use, indeed, of a good deal of Jewish speculation about a Messiah 'coming with the clouds of heaven' (*Dan.* vii. 13), about the ascent of the Blessed through the seven heavens to God, about the hierarchies of angels, thrones, principalities, and powers. But nothing is more absurd than the disparaging references of some teachers of our time to what is called the 'three-storey theology' of the New Testament—the idea that the New Testament teaching depends upon the existence of a local and material heaven above the earth, and a local and material hell below it. Nothing indeed is more remarkable than the almost complete absence from the New Testament of anything of the sort. Dull readers may have understood the language, just as the dull critics have, in a stupid literal sense: but not so the writers. They are using symbols.

They could not in fact do otherwise. They knew as well as we do that absolute truth cannot be adequately expressed in human language. The difficulty comes not from the limitations of their knowledge, but from the nature of the event itself. Granted that our Lord did ascend to the right hand of God, still the words convey to us no detailed picture of

what that means. We can only know things through experience; all knowledge comes in that way. We can to a certain extent expand our experience, but only by the help of, and on the same lines as, the experience itself. That is exactly what is meant by faith—the extension of knowledge beyond experience; and a great deal of our life is lived upon that principle. But in the event which we are now considering, we assert, as the first Christians asserted, that our Lord has passed with his body far beyond all the limits of our present experience. He entered into other conditions; conditions which we hope to experience ourselves some day, but of which, short of that, we can have no possible conception. The words, therefore, in which we assert 'he ascended *into heaven*' (as if it were a geographical place), can convey nothing detailed to human imagination, for us who have so little insight into the realities to which they refer.[1]

Nevertheless, when we say the language is 'symbolical' we do not mean it is 'unreal.' A symbol in Christian theology has always meant something more than a mere sign. It has always had the meaning of a sacrament; an effectual sign in which the symbol partakes of the reality of the thing signified. And for

[1] In this they are, therefore, absolutely different from the words in which the creeds attest the Virgin Birth, which was an event in this world.

this reason we must not renounce our right to use earthly language about heavenly things. The Incarnation is our assurance that in using about the Ascension, or the Eucharist or any other mystery of the Catholic religion, the language of space and time, of flesh and blood, we are not distorting the reality or saying anything false. Rudimentary and incomplete as the impression may be which we are capable of receiving about divine realities, nevertheless the material means by which the reality is conveyed to us does not distort or misrepresent it, any more than the mechanism of sight distorts the images it conveys of the outside world. We are assured that God can sufficiently reveal his truth to us in the terms of human action, because he has revealed his own self to us in human flesh.

It is a mistake to turn away from the seen in order to realize the unseen. We are not to be frightened by either Modernists or Quakers from the bodily language of the Church's formulas, even when we cannot follow the words in our experience beyond a certain point. So in the Ascension of our Lord, when we say 'he went up,' and 'a cloud received him out of their sight,' that is the human form which the event must wear; that was its natural expression for men. No amount of restatement will ever make any improvement upon it or bring us any nearer to the truth. And we may be quite certain

that once we give up speaking of our Lord's Ascension in the way that simple people do, and as the New Testament describes it, we shall be in danger of losing some real portion of the reality. If we want to know what the Ascension means in its spiritual sense, we shall not arrive at it by dropping the material form in which it first made itself known—in the same language as the Incarnation.

AND what is the spiritual meaning of the Ascension? It can be stated summarily under two heads. It is the pledge of the fulfilment of human destiny; and it is the guarantee of the universal lordship and priesthood of Jesus.

First, then, mankind in the person of Jesus Christ has actually reached the goal of all spiritual evolution, and is in heaven, in the fullest and most immediate presence of God and the most intimate communion with him. And the fact that 'the man Christ Jesus' has attained this fullness of life is the pledge of our hope that we too may attain it. This heavenly life is true life: being spiritual, it is not less real but far more real than earthly life: it is the life which we were created to inherit, and it lasts for ever. The heavens and the earth will pass away, but Christ's gospel will never pass away. From the beginning of his life on earth he put himself deliberately

under human conditions and underwent the experiences of humanity, and to the end he maintained the same unity of nature and outlook with mankind: even his relation to the Father he shares, as man, with other men—'I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God' (*St. John* xx. 17). So his Ascension into heaven makes him the first among many brethren, the firstfruits of the human race. (1 *Cor.* xv. 23.)

This life which Christians hope to share with him hereafter is the fulfilment of the spiritual life of man begun here on earth: it is no new life, but the natural and proper development of that on which we are already entered. It differs from earthly life only in the wider range and added fullness which it there takes on. It is not subject to the checks and limitations which are peculiar to the transient life of 'flesh and blood.' St. Paul, who has a unique claim to have seen some revelation while yet on earth of Christ's glorified body after his Ascension (see *Acts* ix. 3–9), gives us the result of his reflections on that vision in 1 *Cor.* xv.; and while he emphasizes the fact that the life hereafter is one and continuous with our earthly life, he strongly insists upon three features of it, which depend upon its being wholly spiritual—incorruption, glory, and power. (1 *Cor.* xv. 42–44.)

Secondly, Christ's Ascension is the guarantee

of his universal lordship and priesthood. 'The Ascension was at once an end and a beginning —the close of one dispensation and the dawn of another. It limits and unites the life of Christ and the life of his Church, or rather, to express the same thought differently, the life of Christ in his humiliation and the life of Christ in glory. . . . It is the Ascension that brings him who died and rose again within the reach of every child of man, throughout all the ages and throughout all the earth. It makes that to be universal which was seen to be limited before.'

So writes Bishop Westcott. Christ's special functions of Prophet, Priest, and King, belong to him as man and the captain of men: and during the days of his earthly sojourn they could only be exercised with all the natural limitations of space and time which appertain to human activity on earth. But since his Ascension he has exercised them universally without being subject to those limitations, through his Holy Spirit. So we may truly picture him riding through and through the world, conquering and to conquer; 'to the one a savour from death unto death, to the other a savour from life unto life' (2 *Cor.* ii. 16).

'All things are put under his feet,' writes the late Dr. Scott Holland. 'He is made Lord over all powers of God that can conceivably work for our good. His name supplies the key to their use, his will releases them,

his mind interprets them, his cross and passion bring them into play, his intercession determines their application. The entire force of divine redemption scattered throughout the world in a thousand manifestations is in his hands to administer; it has its seat in his body, it is taken up into his royalty, and it flows down to us through his sanction, under his benediction, by his word. For he is the sum and consummation of all things, and that for ever, until the whole earth has become his, and all that works against God has been subdued under his supremacy; until the end is come, and the kingdoms of the world are become kingdoms of our God and of his Christ.'

And in particular, his atoning sacrifice is universalized. The life he offered once on the cross, he ever lives to present within the veil. And the same life is presented by the same High Priest on every Christian altar; every Mass gives to his own on earth a share in the great sacrificial worship of heaven. 'Alleluia, thou art here, we ask not how.' Space and time are annihilated in that Eucharistic act: the true Priest and Victim is a present reality.

Such, then, is something of what we mean by belief in the Ascension. Allegorize it and spiritualize it as we will, it remains, nevertheless, the central hope of all the prophets and kings, of all the sighs and tears, of the older dispensation, as well as of the clearer vision

and fuller faith of the new. Without the Ascension the Christian faith is an empty husk, an ideal of moral character, a merely intellectual conviction. Even the resurrection of Jesus would have been an event of comparatively small significance, if it had been no more than a return to life on earth for a shorter or a longer space of time. Nor indeed would the Ascension itself have been anything, had it been only an assumption, or the apotheosis of some hero divinity. It is more than that; more than any event, more than any process. It is one of the great facts of the spiritual order. As such it can never be a mere piece of embroidery on the Christian religion, nor a mere chapter put in to form a fitting conclusion to its story: it is nothing less than the mainspring of its activity, the heart and centre of its enthusiasm and its hope. Christianity without the Ascension will end where all religions have ended, which have tried to find in the earthly life of our Lord, or of some other person, enough to satisfy the highest needs of men. Man's heart is meant for God, and for heaven: his treasure, if on earth, will fail him. 'Even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him so no more' (*2 Cor.* v. 16). But to those who believe in the Ascension, that treasure is imperishable, because it is in heaven, 'where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God' (*Coloss.* iii. 1).

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